CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Marion Barry 1978 Mayoral Primary Campaign Oral History Project
Interview with Johnny Allem
Conducted on September 27, 2017 by Betty King

Johnny Allem has been a journalist, political consultant, and activist, a businessman and writer. He moved to DC in 1969 and became involved in local politics and the campaign for Home Rule, while managing and consulting on Congressional and gubernatorial campaigns. He is founder and president of Aquila Recovery Clinics, modern, science-focused outpatient clinics in DC at Friendship Heights and Capitol Hill. His new book *Say the Second Thing…* focuses on actions useful in early recovery from addiction illness.

BK: Today is September 27th, 2017. I'm here with Johnny Allen to talk about Marion's 1978 campaign. You're not a native of the District of Columbia. You came here from Florida, didn't you?

JA: I came here from Florida in 1969. I grew up a lot of places. My father was a preacher, moved around a lot. But I call East Tennessee home, because that's where I went to high school and started college and where I really began my adult career as a reporter for the *Journal*.

BK: And so, you were a political consultant in Florida before you came here. Is that right?

JA: Yes. When I went to Florida, I went from being a reporter to being in the public relations field and did a lot of projects. I was in housing a lot, as FHA was opening housing to African Americans, and I was part of that commercially. But I began writing speeches and running campaigns in 1962, and it just blended into me doing more and more campaigns, and I started doing them in the southeast and then I moved to Washington in 1969 and kept on doing that.

BK: You came here for a specific job?

JA: No, I actually was – my mentor was LeRoy Collins, a former governor of Florida, and one of the biggest campaigns of importance to me was his run for the United States Senate in 1968. But he had pictures of himself with Martin Luther King in Selma. He didn't have them, but the press had them, and that pretty much precluded the fact that we could win that campaign. After 1968, which was very sad – I mean, I did some great work there. I did a film on him [Collins] that's still classic, and he and other friends said, "Johnny, you're a smart kid. You ought to go up to Washington and work out of there." And I did. The person who recommended me the most was a guy named Reubin Askew [later Governor of Florida 1971-9], who at that time was in the [Florida] state senate. And when I moved to Washington, it proved the adage that what you need is a briefcase and to cross a state line, then you become more valuable, because he brought me back to Florida and most of my Florida work I did after I moved off to Washington, I had all of his work, all Lawton Chiles' work. I worked for Sam Gibbons [elected to US House of Representatives from Florida in 1962 and was reelected 16 times], I worked for Claude Pepper [represented Florida in the US Senate 1936-51 and in the US House of Representatives 1963-89]. I worked for –

BK: All the good guys.

JA: Yeah. Lehman down in Florida, way down in South Florida, Congressman Lehman, and just lots of Florida causes, after I moved to DC. And I stayed in campaigns. In 1972, I was known for writing the AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] political action program of the two-weekend course that by the year 2000, graduated 90,000 union members, and worked with Jerry Clark there and Bill Lucy, and Jerry Wurf. So, I was recognized for really being part of the public employee

movement starting. That was what I became known for in DC in ’72, ’73, and ’74. And a lot of campaigns. Jay Rockefeller’s first campaign for governor [of West Virginia], I worked for him. I worked for Jimmy Carter in his governor’s race. I worked for Jimmy Carter. Didn’t work in the presidential campaign so much, but I did work for –

BK: Oh, in his Georgia campaigns?

JA: In the Georgia campaigns, and then later on I worked for David Gambrell his protégé or his friend that became a United States senator for a brief period of time, did that campaign.

BK: When did you meet Marion Barry?

JA: How I met Marion Barry is really interesting. It was my first political experience in DC, and Max Barry [DC Democratic activist and fundraiser] and Bill Lucy [Secretary Treasurer of AFSCME] asked me to help in Walter Fauntroy’s campaign and I was doing writing and doing the media, but I was also the finance coordinator.

BK: Now, that was in ’68, was it?

JA: Seventy-one. It was the very first race we had in the District for –

BK: Oh, for the non-voting delegate.

JA: – non-voting delegate. We hadn’t – except for school board, we had a – ’68, you could vote for the president and you could vote for a school board. And in ’71, we could vote for this non-voting delegate. We had offices on P Street, 2000 P Street, and everybody was dancing around where we could get money, and this rumor started that we were going to get a check from Joe Danzansky at Giant Foods, and everybody was real excited about that, but it never came and never came. And so, I heard Bridget Quinn [later John Wilson’s chief of staff when he was in the City Council] in the outer office answer some

guy, I heard him say, "Where's Johnny Allen? Who is he?" And Bridget said, "Well, he's right here. I'll get him for you."

So, in walks Marion Barry with this check from Joe Danzansky for $1,000. (Laughter.) So that's how I met – I don't know what the relationship was, why it was he was the one to deliver the check, but I was very, very glad to see it and I was very glad to meet him. And we became very, very close pretty quickly, and I helped him – my best friend was John Wilson, who was managing the Fauntroy campaign, and John and I became very close, like brothers. We were drinking buddies and everything.

BK: Now, Doug Patton [who helped Marion in 1978] was involved in that campaign too.

JA: Doug Patton was involved in that campaign, yeah. Doug, John, myself. A fellow whose name I forget who became later governor of Iowa, was involved in that campaign. So many people.

BK: And so that was when you met Marion.

JA: Yes.

BK: Then tell me about your relationship with him. Did you support him when he ran for the first city council?

JA: Yeah, well, first when he ran for school board.

BK: Oh, so you had already supported him then.

JA: Yeah. Yeah, he ran for the school board and I was precinct captain of Precinct 17, which was in AME Church on M Street. And he pulls up in his car and he say, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm working for John Wilson." He said, "Well, you can work for me too, can't you?" I said, "Yeah." So, I gave him my literature. So, I remember that scene from his school board race. I wasn't in the hierarchy of his campaign or like that, but just

a friend. You know, a friend helping a friend. And I did Precinct 17 for years. The next time I think I really got close to him was with Ivanhoe [Donaldson, Barry's campaign manager in 1978] and him together, talking about whether he should run for mayor or not.

BK: Had you known Ivanhoe prior to this?

JA: No. That's about when I got to know Ivanhoe. I married my present wife, Barbara, who's a native Washingtonian, and back a couple generations, in 1976, and we moved to Church Street, 1734 Church Street right near – off Dupont Circle. We used to meet in my living room, but Ivanhoe, what they wanted from me was writing and ideas, so that's what I did in that campaign. I didn't do a lot of – I mean, I did footwork, like I worked Precinct 17, but I wasn't in the office or in the street organization that much. But the things I remember the most was looking for ideas and looking for themes that would penetrate all audiences, whether what part of town. That was a time when there was a lot of population shift in the city, and houses were boarded up and they had been reclaimed for tax purposes or what have you. But there was a lot of empty houses with boards over them. And so, I concocted this campaign called "Take the Boards Off."

BK: Yeah, it was great.

JA: And I found a good place to have a press conference off of Logan Circle somewhere. I can't remember where it is today. But that caught on, and the *Post* liked it. They were looking for things to say about him. And it was an issue that, who was going to be against it, you know? But it illustrated that I'm going to get work done. So, I did things like that. That was the one I remember the most because I worked on it a long time and wrote all the copy for his speech and for –

BK: That was a theme of the campaign that sold very, very well.

JA: Yeah.

BK: It was really great. I didn't realize that you were the originator.

JA: I was and did the research on it and wrote the copy and that sort of thing. But all during the whole campaign, Ivanhoe would come to my house every Saturday morning at 10 o'clock, and my wife had coffee ready for him, and we would talk about themes and copy and things like that and he would – because I couldn't cut what I was doing from my paying jobs Monday through Friday. I still was traveling a lot for campaigns around the country, but that was a date we had, was Saturday morning all through the campaign.

BK: Well, you did a good job because there were some really great themes in that campaign. And the thing was that Marion talked about the same things no matter where he went. He was tailoring them for a citywide campaign. And where were you on the night we won? Were you at the Harambee House already?

JA: I was, I was. I don't have a real strong memory, but I was there. I guess my memories of the '94 campaign, I keep mixing up, because I was much more deeply involved in that and have more crystal memory of that. But I don't really remember election night that much. I know I was there, I was excited, and I have friends to this day who were part of that. One of them is a colleague of my wife, Bertie Bowman. Bertie Bowman is from South Carolina and he worked in the Senate. He wrote a book called *Step by Step*, because the first job he got was cleaning steps on the Capitol Hill.

But he and his wife Elaine – Elaine was a native Washingtonian – lived in Deanwood and he eventually became like my wife's deputy. She was the chief clerk for the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. But he worked in the Senate for – in fact, he's still

working at the Senate, over fifty years now, and he's a dear family friend of ours and I remember that he and Elaine were with me on election night at the Barry victory party.

BK: It was an exciting evening.

JA: He was kind of known as the Dean of Deanwood.

BK: You never had any official role in any of the administrations in the government. Were you on any boards or commissions?

JA: Yeah. Somebody named Betty King –

BK: Oh, no. Did I?

JA: – tapped me for a job, and actually the one I remember the most was the advisory committee to DCRCA. I don't know what it was called, but I know that Bonnie Wilson [John Wilson's wife] and I were both appointed to it, and Bonnie and I worked together on a couple initiatives that I can't remember what they are right now. But I enjoyed that work.

BK: Which board was it?

JA: It was the advisory board that advised DCRCA, the regulations and – it's the regulatory agency where you get housing permits.

BK: Oh, the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs.

JA: Yeah, Consumer and Regulatory Affairs. There you go. Yeah, and we were the advisory to that. And I know I was appointed to some other things like that, but that's the one I did a lot of work on and worked with Bonnie, and Bonnie and I became really – well, we were friends anyway, but we really worked well together. I was not a person jumping up to nine to five when Marion wanted me to take a government job. My wife said, "He

wants you in the government? You're not a government person." (Laughter.) I never saw myself as – I mean, I liked campaigns. That's what I did for a living, and –

BK: Right. Now, you worked on his subsequent campaigns as well, did you?

JA: Yes, I did. I don't remember a lot of them, but the one that I remember the most, of course, is '94 when he came back from his incarceration, and I was very, very, very upset about that whole affair and how he was tracked down. No other municipal official in the world would ever put up with the kind of scrutiny and craziness that the FBI did in that period, so I was very resentful about that and very close to him anyway.

BK: You're referring, of course, to the Vista Hotel?

JA: Yes. So, I was anxious to do that, and I – who was the campaign manager? Not Anita. It starts with an A. [Her name was Ayo Bryant].

BK: Well, yeah, that was a remarkable comeback, the fourth campaign.

JA: It was Vernon Hawkins [retired from a long career in DC government], Ivanhoe, me, and his campaign manager, who I'll remember in a minute and I can drive you to her house. We were bonded, and I was there every day in that campaign. Every public remark that he was involved in, I was his speechwriter. I did the literature. I did everything that came to do with our message.

BK: Yeah. That was the one campaign I didn't work on. I was the chair of John Ray's campaign that year. No, it was a crime, what they did to him. So, what do you see as Marion's contribution? I mean, as you say, the Vista Hotel was such a dreadful situation and it has to such a degree blocked out, particularly for young people who weren't here at the time or didn't see the changes that Marion brought about, any good that he did. But do you feel that he made significant contributions to the city?

JA: Oh, he changed the landscape of DC politics, he changed the landscape culturally. There is just enormous contributions he made to that life. I have to say that I'm a recovering alcoholic and I got sober in '82. So, people say, "Were you a friend of his in his addiction use?" I was not. John Wilson and I were drinking buddies. And while I was close to Marion and Effi [his wife] as a friend and more than just politics, I was not really part of that. Anita Bonds a couple times arranged – I don't know if this needs to be in what you're doing – for me to meet Marion before Vista Hotel.

BK: Speak up a little.

JA: One meeting was 30 days before the Vista Hotel event, and I had a very warm and friendly meeting with Marion and talked about changing his lifestyle, and he had arranged for some other meetings to happen that never seemed to happen because this catastrophe happened in the meantime. But that cloud exists, but the solid work that Marion brought was at several levels, okay? There was, first of all, the actual programs, like the jobs program for young people, like the reversal of management styles in certain agencies where it began to get more grass roots-up instead of top-down, and where he leveled the influence between the business community, even though they were for him originally, and he wasn't doing it against them but he was trying to show them that the future of the city business-wise was going to be stimulated by what he was doing in bringing African Americans to the table. He's often criticized –

BK: And other people of color, and women, and minorities of all kinds.

JA: Yeah, yeah. So, there was the message of that and how the government operated. Secondly, there was a stimulation of young people, generally, black and white, really, to be politically oriented. Thirdly, there was a very concentrated effort to create minority

success stories in business, and that lasts till this day, whether you take the McKissock organization, you take Duke Greene, you take all these people that became specialists and leaders in their business community, they owe all that to Marion. Before then, it was just handed out to the big donors and there was no conscious effort to build a middle class, and that's his legacy as far as I'm concerned.

BK: Yeah, indeed. Well, thank you very much for talking with us. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

JA: I miss him.

BK: I do too, every day.

JA: We kept a pretty close relationship, but it was not long before his passing I was going through the Wilson Building – I don't know why I was there particularly – and he saw me and he said, "Come on down." So, we went back in his office and he just told them to leave us alone and we had about three hours of just talking and memories and goals and issues, going all the way back to Fisk University. We used to say, even today, he's – two of us from Tennessee. I was from East Tennessee and he was from West Tennessee, and we always used to laugh and say anybody from Tennessee will know if you bring somebody from East Tennessee and West together in common ground, you break a new ground. So, we laughed about things like that, and his son came by and he called his son in to talk to me about a number of things –

BK: Oh, poor Chris.

JA: – I won't necessarily go into. But Marion and I stayed very close, and I had a good run in his administration. I crossed wires with Cora [Marion' third wife] for a while. She today is a good friend of mine, but she tried to get me removed from the Mayor's Office, and

I'd just say, "Well, you got me in the government; you've got to put up with me." So, he gave me a choice and I became the deputy commissioner for mental health, and I'm forever grateful of that. And for six years, I was responsible for the business side of running St. Elizabeths mental health system through two receiverships, and I'm very proud of some of the things that I did. I was the first one to sponsor putting mental health professionals into the school system, and that new pilot program we had in Malcolm X Elementary School, they tell me today is in fifty-seven of the schools, elementary schools, and it's also in other schools now too. So, I'm very proud of that, and the opportunity that Marion gave me to make change in the addiction recovery field as it relates to the District population. So, I had a lot of things that opened up to me through my relationship with him, and with John Wilson, and so I'm forever grateful for that.

BK: Yeah, many people have similar experiences of being challenged with something that was outside their previous experience through him. Well, thank you very, very much. I really appreciate it.

JA: I hope that's helpful.

BK: It's very helpful. Thank you.

JA: Maybe a side that other people aren't talking about. I don't know.

BK: No, it was great. No, you know, there are so many people that Marion's touched over the years that it's amazing. I mean, nobody that I've interviewed has –

JA: That's why I am –

BK: – has failed to recognize that he had his demons and so forth, but, my God, the impact that he had on all of our lives.

[End of interview]